

The Revival of Sisterhoods in The Church of England

1841 - 1855

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"Why then have you no Beguines, no Sisters of Charity? Why in the most needful, the most merciful form that charity can take, have you not yet followed the example of the French and the Netherlanders? No Vincent de Paul has been heard in your pulpits; no Louise le Gras has appeared among the daughters of Great Britain! Piety has not found its way into your prisons; your hospitals are imploring it in vain; nothing is wanting in them but religious charity, and oh what a want is that! "

1

Robert Southey, Poet Laureate

When Southey put forth this question in 1829, the Church of England had been without the monastic life for nearly three hundred years. Southey's question carried with it an appeal for the restoration of one particular form of the Religious Life: active orders of women performing charitable work. By 1539 the monasteries had been dissolved, yet Southey could make his appeal on realistic grounds, for although the actuality of the Religious Life was absent, the ideal remained. It was dormant during Elizabeth's reign, revived in the 17th century, and nearly died in the 18th. The revival of religious orders in Anglicanism is usually directly attributed to the Oxford Movement<sup>2</sup>, yet this revival must be seen as something not totally out of keeping with the previous three centuries of Anglican history.

During the 17th century, thoughts favorable to monasticism were expressed in the writings of antiquaries and church leaders who recognized the value inherent in a way of life now in ruins. In two books, De non Temerandis Ecclesiis (1613) and The History and Fate of Sacrilege (1632), Sir Henry Spelman praises the hospitality, charity and erudition of the monks, and places in dark contrast the conditions under the new Poor Law. Archbishop Bramhall of Armagh declared that the monasteries

should have been reformed, in keeping with Anglican method, and not destroyed. Archbishop Leighton of Glasgow was of the same opinion, adding that the monasteries were needed as places of retreat, education, and mortification. The seventeenth century theologian Henry Thorndike saw monasticism as not essential to the constitution of the Church of England, but as "advantageous." He desired the living presence of the monastic life in the Church of England, as he regarded it as a more perfect form of the Christian Life. Some High Churchmen of this period put a high value on celibacy. Bishop Andrewes was thankful for "the virgins, flowers of purity, celestial gems, brides of the Immaculate Lamb," and was himself an example of this way of life. It is said that in making ecclesiastical promotions, Archbishop Laud favored single men. Hooker wrote that a single life was more "angelical and divine." Jeremy Taylor in Holy Living speaks of celibacy in glowing terms as "a life of angels, the enamel of the soul, the huge advantage of religion."

Furthermore, the monastic ideal was reflected in church life, most notably in the Office. The early seventeenth century liturgists stated that the Anglican reformers had made it possible for the laity to take their rightful part in the Church's official prayer. The Offices of the Book of Common Prayer were in daily use. The (originally monastic) tradition of continuous recitation of the Psalter was upheld. In addition to the Prayer Book Offices, the Primers of Elizabeth's reign (based on the Little Office of Our Lady) and Bishop Cosin's Devotions (based on the Breviary Offices and published in 1627), reminded one of the monastic hours of prayer. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it was usual for the members of certain devout families to gather together

morning and evening for Matins and Evensong if unable to get to the Parish Church. There were actual attempts at living according to a monastic lifestyle, the most notable of these being Nicholas Ferrar and the quasi-monastic community at Little Gidding which was in existence from 1626 to 1646. This household of thirty men, women, boys and girls, was an attempt to revive the communal way of living of the early Christians. The daily routine of hours, services, and work was similar to that of a monastic house. Ferrar had chosen celibacy as had two of his nieces. The place was attacked and destroyed by anti-Royalists soldiers in 1646, but while it existed high praises were forthcoming from many church leaders. Peter Anson (in the Call of the Cloister, p. 14), also notes that by the seventeenth century there were numerous purely English Roman Catholic monasteries and convents overseas. Many persons obviously felt that exile was well worth the cost of living the Religious Life.

In the eighteenth century, "the ideal of the Religious Life was twice<sup>3</sup> condemned" as Popish and "enthusiastic." Nevertheless, the ideal was not dead. Traces of it are to be found in both the Non-Jurors and the Methodists, with their aims of Christian perfection, prayer without ceasing, the longing for holiness, the desire to preach to the poor, and more frequent and regular communion. William Law, in his Serious Call to A Devout and Holy Life (1729), gives the clearest and most vigorous expression of the Religious ideal. He foresees the formation of Religious Communities living a simple life of devotion, poverty and celibacy, and charitable service to others. In 1740 he actually set up a monastic establishment for two women at King's Cliffe in order to live out the precepts of the Serious Call. However, except for this and the suggestions

of a few other prominent men, there was little interest in monastic revival. In the closing years of the eighteenth century, England offered a willing and sympathetic refuge to many Roman Catholic bishops, priests, Religious and laity who had been driven out of France by the Revolution in 1789. English antipathy towards the Revolutionists in France, coupled with sympathy for and admiration of the refugees, if it did not in small part break down some of the English prejudice towards monasticism, at least had the effect of reminding Anglicans that such a mode of life was absent in the Church of England.

It can be seen then, that the revival of the Religious Life owes something to the movements of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, as well as to the Oxford Movement of the nineteenth, of which it was one of the chief results.

Many reasons, causes or factors have been put forward in order to account for the revival of the Religious Orders in the midst of the nineteenth century. The prevalent view has been that there was a great need for the charitable services which could be offered by organized groups of dedicated women. Certainly Southey's appeal of 1829 attests to a social need, as do previous similar, but less well-known, published pleas of 1825 and 26 for "Protestant Sisters of Mercy" for nursing work primarily. However, this factor alone is insufficient to account for the particular development of the style of life of these "dedicated women." Peter Anson puts forth what seems to him to be a more likely view: the foundations in the use of the Daily Office retained by the Church of England preserved the framework of a method of prayer which could only fully develop within a religious community. But this again

is a partial truth. The picture is much more complex. Owen Chadwick in The Victorian Church (Vol. I) rightly describes the situation in the early nineteenth century as a time when three strands of thought lived incongruously together: devotional, romantic and pastoral. There was the desire for a life of holiness, characterized by the Evangelical Movement, as well as by the ideals of the consecrated life held by the Tractarians. There was the Romantic Movement with its effects on literature and architecture. The story of the revival of the Religious Life is partly tied into the Gothic revival in art and literature. The interest in "Gothick" architecture and the more romantic aspects of medievalism, and the popularity of Gothic novels helped to encourage an interest in monastic life. The influence of Sir Walter Scott has been classed as one of the antecedents of the Oxford Movement and an indirect antecedent of the monastic revival. A.M. Allchin states that the Romantic poets prepared the way for Tractarian theology. The pastoral needs of the time were many and varied; for one, the distress of the poor caused much concern. The increased Poor Rates brought pressure on the upper classes. Some people recalled that the monastic institutions of former times had been a great social blessing and that the dissolution occasioned the institution of the Poor Rates. Others refuted this. It was, however, for the Tractarians to take these "three strands" and weave them into a "threefold cord (which) is not quickly broken." (Eccles. 4:12) The Romantic movement and the various social needs were but subsidiary causes which "came together and were transformed in the central theological and spiritual inspiration of the Tractarians. By themselves, the preliminary causes could not have produced the communities."

The practical and social needs of the times were perhaps the most important impulse of the revival of the Religious Life. The communities were part of the total (not just the Tractarian) church's effort to adapt herself to a rapidly changing society and to meet some of the crying needs of this society. Although the Sisterhoods were seemingly the work of the Tractarians, they had a broader basis of foundation. We have seen that there was some agitation for religious communities of women before 1833. Non-Tractarians such as Thomas Arnold and Robert Southey were for it.<sup>6</sup> The church had not kept up with industrial development and had not adapted to changing populations. This deficiency was most visible in the growing towns and cities. "In a circle of ten miles around London, it was estimated that 977,000 were shut out from the common pastoral offices of the Established Church."<sup>7</sup> In seeking for a remedy to such problems, some Anglicans recalled the availability of teachers of religion and morals and pastoral visitors in the times of the monasteries. The more they compared the past with the present, the more appealing grew the monastic ideal. Continental travel had become a popular pastime after the Napoleonic Wars. Some travellers, coming in contact with monastics abroad, grew in sympathy and admiration towards them. The French Sisters of Charity and The Beguines in the Netherlands came in for the highest praise. These were less restricted and more active orders and therefore made a greater appeal to Englishmen. While still condemning popery, an Englishman could accept these communities because of their good works. In 1825 an issue of "The Quarterly Review," an organ of the Tory Party, gives a good bit of space to monastic history and makes it a living issue by its expressed desire for "re-



formed monasteries without vows and superstitions," which would fulfil various social needs. Social needs required neither vows or asceticism. These were to come in later, through the religious interest of the important movement which has been said to have begun in 1833. One of the great pastoral needs of the day was the provision of definite Christian teaching for the children of the poorer classes. Another social factor was the need for better nursing. Robert Southey and others were leaders in advocating nursing reform, and for this means they envisioned Protestant Sisters of Charity modelled after the Beguines they had observed abroad. Southey said that nurses were needed in the country districts as well as the towns. At any rate, disciplined, proper and well-trained nurses were needed and were thought of only within the context of a religious Sisterhood. That nursing reform was regarded only, or at least mainly, in this manner, paved the way for the women's communities. Of all possible utilitarian arguments the one of social service was foremost. Great efforts were made to show that the monastic life was not destructive and unsocial, but practical and constructive. The active and practical side of the Religious Life was emphasized first, as it happened to be the aspect of the life that appealed to people and to the needs of the time. This was to prove beneficial in later years when the communities had to face opposition and hostility.

Another one of the most widely perceived social problems of the nineteenth century was the problem of surplus women. Along with this there was a growing interest in women's social and industrial position. According to the census of 1851, there were more than 500,000 surplus women in the United Kingdom. In 1861, this figure rose to 573,530.



In an article in the British Magazine of June 1835, Newman advocated women's orders because they would "give dignity and independence to the position of women in society." Marriage was the "sole shelter" for women "against the rude world," and since women so far outnumbered men,<sup>9</sup> many were left without this "refuge."

In 1862 Seymour, in the first speech on the subject of Sisterhoods at a Canterbury Convocation, noted that there were many women with no home duties to fulfil.<sup>10</sup> Advocates of Sisterhoods laid great stress on the need of finding suitable employment for the single woman and those forced to self-support. Some also warned that unless opportunities such as the Sisterhoods were provided, those seeking a life of special consecration would go over to the Roman convents.

Marriage was the only occupation open to women of the middle class, partly because a very inadequate education left them extremely dependent on their husbands. The role of wife and mother was highly valued in Victorian society. The only other option available in life-style was that of spinsterhood, an indeterminate role and a state of life forced on many by necessity, rather than by free choice. The fate of well to do spinsters who had no particular occupation was often pitiable; it was worse for those, who upon the death of father or brother, had no means of support. Southey remarked that as soon as an Englishwoman tried to earn her own living she lost caste. Those who favored Sisterhoods argued that voluntary celibacy would raise the status of spinsters generally.

"Respectability" was the basic norm for the Victorian middle class. The crucial distinction between lady and woman was laid down in terms of work and non-work. A man's family served an important social function by translating his income into symbols of status. Many within the church

sought for a greater range of roles for women. The only available form of service within the church was that of the clergyman's wife. Florence Nightingale complained that the Church of England had little use for women:

" I would have given her my head, my hands, my heart. She would not have them..... she told me to go back and do crochet in my mother's drawing room; or if I were tired of that, to marry..... You may go to the Sunday School if you like it, she said. But she gave me no training even for that. She gave me neither work to do for her, nor education for it." 11

Anna B. Jameson, an early feminist, expressed similar sentiments:

" .... the education given to our women is merely calculated to render them ornamental and well-informed; but it does not train them , even those who are so inclined and fitted by nature, to be effective instruments of social improvement." 12

To a young woman desiring full time occupation in social welfare work, teaching or nursing, the Sisterhoods offered opportunities which were not easily found in the world in general. 13 There was a real connection between the Oxford Movement and the movement for a more liberal understanding of women's place in society. Women were attracted to the High Church parishes because their many organizations provided much work for women. Many Sisterhoods began as a group of devoted ladies of privilege attempting to help the Vicar overcome some specific social evil. The theological rationale usually followed this social and religious development. There was also the aesthetic appeal of the worship and the more frequent services which were supported by upper and middle class ladies. The early Sisterhoods can be seen as representing limited but implicitly feminist goals. Women who entered the Sisterhoods were "deviant" in that they had rejected some of the central values of Victorian

society. Some of the supporters of Sisterhoods worked with an incipiently feminist conception of the role of women and insisted on the right of women to organize their own activities. The communities of women helped to put forth the idea of real cooperation between men and women in the serious affairs of the world and that such affairs need no longer be the monopoly of men. Sisterhoods provided an important link between the old and new kinds of women's work. They provided important transitional functions in the growth of secular nursing and female occupations generally. Regarding the nursing profession, in 1854 a Doctor wrote:

" No respectable person would undertake so disagreeable an office." 14

The involvement of the Sisterhoods in nursing raised its status and assisted in working out a systematic training program for nurses. Through the work of Florence Nightingale and the Sisterhoods, nursing was established as a Christian vocation and profession for women living in the world. Also because of their work, female celibacy became defined as a role which might be consciously chosen, and thus it lost some of its negative valuation.

Pusey was also inspired by social concerns such as the plight of the poor and the occupation of women. In speaking in support of the religious vocation to a Sisterhood, he asked " Why should not God call women too ?" and argued in favor of treating male and female vocations equally. Pusey and the Tractarians saw the revival of the Religious Life as providing part of the answer to some of the particular social problems of the day. Their vision, however, was much broader than this. The Tractarians were moved by the desire to foster every manifestation of the essential catholicism of the Church of England. They saw the revival of the

Religious Life as restoring something of the fulness of the Christian life to the church; as part of a campaign for asserting the full catholic character of the Church of England. Pusey felt that there must be something very wrong with Anglicanism if it could not produce religious communities. He arrived at this conclusion through his study of the Fathers and the seventeenth century Anglican Divines. He saw that the Religious Life had existed in all ages of the Catholic church and in all parts of the world. His studies also led him to an understanding of the importance and significance of consecrated celibacy. Restoring the religious orders to the Anglican church would be one way of asserting the affinity of the Anglican church with the rest of Catholic Christendom, both Roman and Orthodox. The existence of Sisterhoods would be a silent witness to the inadequacy of two views: The Roman Catholic one, which held that the life of a Religious could not be lived without the aid of sacramental grace unavailable in the Church of England; and the Protestant view, which held that such a life was a perversion of the Christian life, should not be allowed, and could never be established in a Reformed church.

In advocating and in working for the revival of the Sisterhoods, the Fractarians made use of the temper of the times - the growing recognition throughout the English church of the demands of charity. All groups in the church agreed on the importance of all schemes for the spiritual and material improvement of the masses. They made use of all the utilitarian arguments, not merely as an expedient, but because they also were struck by the practical values the Sisterhoods had to offer. <sup>15</sup> Along with this, they were able to add, as time went on and as circumstances allowed, a

strong theological and spiritual foundation for the Religious Life. The meaning of the Christian life was, for the Tractarians, above all, a life of holiness. To show the legitimacy of the Religious Life, the Tractarians looked to the past, not out of sheer nostalgia, but to hold before the Church of England definite teachings which were being forgotten. They appealed to the tradition of the primitive church and to the post-Reformation tradition in the church. As a source of legitimacy, the medieval church was very little used, for it would've had little support in the Church of England as a whole. For the majority tradition in the Church of England, the Reformation represented a decisive break with previous tradition. Any claim to a Reformation and post-Reformation ancestry which the supporters of the communities were able to make was a highly significant one. The Low Church Party placed great importance on the Reformation. Appeals based on post-Reformation tradition in the Church of England were more likely to obtain the maximum consensus. The Tractarians proceeded to demonstrate that the Religious orders were the continuing expression of a goal which had always existed in the Church of England. The Tractarian pro-monastic articles of the 1830's and 40's particularly cited the seventeenth century Divines of the Church of England, for these men were, for the Tractarians, the standard theologians of the Anglican church. They revived the ideas of celibacy held by these theologians. They held forth the example of the community at Little Gidding in order to show that religious communities were in accord with the spirit of Anglicanism, not alien to it. They underemphasized, or were unaware of, the debt they owed to the Methodists and Evangelicals. Tractarianism and Evangelicalism shared an affinity of spiritual ideals;

the basic appeal of the Religious Life was the evangelical one of the desire to lead a holy life. Bishop Samuel Wilberforce said, after visiting the Wantage Sisterhood, that v.J. Butler, its founder, seemed to combine the good of the Evangelical party with the devotion of the High Church party. Bishop Walter Frere claimed that the revival of the Religious Life was the outcome of the Evangelical and Catholic movements taken together. The Evangelicals gave the spirit; the Catholics the form.

It has been shown that the Tractarians made use of utilitarian arguments in support of Sisterhoods. It is worth noting that of the seventeenth century Anglican theologians, Herbert Thorndike alone saw the monastic life as valuable in itself, apart from the opportunities it provided for cultivating learning. In the nineteenth century, the religious communities were justified, in the eyes of many, by the work they performed. By 1888, the religious communities having been firmly rooted for over forty years now, Fr. Benson, S.S.J.E. , at the Church Congress in Manchester proclaimed in protest:

" I will not speak of religious communities as a means of getting work done very cheaply ! Such an idea I can only regard as a sacrilege, an insult to God. We have no right to wish that God's work should be done without loss to ourselves..... I cannot contemplate religious communities as a means of extricating us from the embarrassments which are simply occasioned by a sinful habit of greed." 16

The first response towards the ideal of the Religious Life was not inspired by the utilitarian plans of the leaders of the Oxford Movement and others, but from the desire for a consecrated life which their teaching (particularly Newman's sermons, and his book, the Church of the Fathers) had awakened in a young woman, Marian Hughes. On Trinity Sunday, 1841,

she took the three vows of religion privately before Pusey and became the first Anglican Sister since the Reformation. This step did not lead to the foundation of a community, for Marian Hughes was not free to give herself completely until the death of her parents in 1849. This event did, however, encourage Pusey to continue working for the establishment of a Sisterhood. Marian Hughes assisted the movement by actually visiting orders of women in France. She observed the practical working of monastic rules in the Convents of the Augustinian Hospitalers (Ursulines) and the Visitation Nuns at Caen.

Between 1845 and 1855, thirteen communities for women were founded and grew in spite of difficulties. Nine of these are still in existence. Space only permits mention of a few of these communities.

The first community, The Sisterhood of the Holy Cross, was founded in 1845 at 17 Park Village west, London. The house was taken in the name of a lay committee and it and the community were to be a memorial to Robert Southey who had died on the 21st of March 1843. Pusey drew up the rule and was regarded as the founder. He functioned as spiritual superintendent. The motive of the committee was the utilitarian advantages of the social work in the slums which the Sisters performed, Pusey's motive was this and more: he aimed at the restoration of the consecrated single life in the Anglican church. The Sisters paved the way for Florence Nightingale by nursing in the cholera epidemics of 1849 and 53 and in 1854 three Sisters of this order joined other Anglican and Roman Sisters, and travelled to the Crimea to nurse the wounded with Florence Nightingale. This order in 1856 merged with the second community to be established, The Devonport Sisters of Mercy (1848). In January of 1848, Bishop Phillpotts of



Exeter made an appeal for volunteers to help look after a population of 26,000 in the slums of Plymouth where there was no parish church. Priscilla Lydia Sellon answered this appeal and took lodgings in one of the worst streets of the district. She was soon joined by four or five others. The Bishop sanctioned formation of a Sisterhood of Mercy. with Pusey's help a little community grew up. The first work was chiefly educational. " I collected the children myself out of the street ", Miss Sellon said. There was soon a flourishing night school for boys of the gangs around the docks, an industrial school for equally wild girls, a reading room for men and, later on, a lodging-house for homeless families. The Sisters visited the homes of the district, administering relief as it was needed. The work and life of the Sisters was initially supported by money from Miss Sellon's inheritance. In 1852, the Community of St. John the Baptist was founded at Clewer by Canon F.T. Carter to meet yet another social need: the problem of prostitution, one of the worst social evils of that particular district. Carter had for a long time felt the desire to have a part in the revival of the Religious Life. A House of Mercy was established for the accomodation and redemption of these women. This community was regarded as a model for Anglican convents, and by the mid-1870's it was considered by some to be the most successful example of an Anglican Sisterhood. Carter did not attempt to imitate foreign ideals but aimed to fully appreciate the English character in drawing up Rules for this community. In his teaching on virginity he went back to Christ (Matt. 19:12) and to Paul (1Cor.7) for his authority in maintaining it as a higher life for those who can bear it. In 1855, the foundation of the Society of St. Margaret was called forth by a new type of social work.

In the Sussex countryside around East Grinstead were isolated and scattered farms and cottages, the inhabitants of which rarely saw a priest or any sign of the church. Their physical needs were also uncared for. In case of sickness, neither doctor nor skilled nursing nor medical aids were to be had without a walk of several miles over rough roads and not always even then. The cottages were outwardly picturesque but inwardly they were unsanitary breeding grounds of disease. A priest of this area, John Mason Neale, warden of an almshouse for aged men and women, was moved by the needs of the destitute and ill in the cottages and decided to try to organize a system of cottage nursing. For Neale, as with Carter, this particular form of social work was the occasion, rather than the cause of the Sisterhood. Neale had long desired the restoration of the Religious Life on principle. Three women came forward who desired to live a life of consecrated service, who had a close acquaintance with the deplorable conditions of rural Sussex life, and who were willing to take nurses' training. The first Sister was sent out to nurse on July 13, 1855. Her patient was a poor woman dying of consumption in an overcrowded, tumble-down cottage. The Sister slept in a loft, through whose thatched roof the wind penetrated. For more than six months the Sisters took turns nursing this woman, besides caring for the baby, mending clothes, looking after the children, and other domestic work. The work of these Sisters and women like Florence Nightingale silenced those who contended that delicately nurtured women were incapable of bearing such physical hardships. <sup>19</sup> The novel feature of this community was that the Sisters lived away from their house in East Grinstead during the periods of their nursing work. If a Sister were assigned to work in another parish, she

often lived at the clergyman's house and dined at his table, a custom which shocked the Clewer Sisters. Neale's Sisterhood thus appeared more active and less "regular" than the others. Neales's Rule for his community was in part an adaptation of Carter's and in part founded upon the Rule of the Visitation Community of St. Francis de Sales and the Principles of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. Neale's visits to an admiration for Roman Catholic convents on the continent tended to make him a bit more imitative of Roman Catholic communities than Carter.

All these communities, and others established at this time, were active or "mixed" communities, combining the monastic life with a life of service of others. These communities did pioneering work in nursing, education, and care of the poor in the slums of the great cities.

These early communities were, for the most part, established in dioceses where the Bishop was sympathetic. For many years, however, they had no recognized place in the life of the church and had to face much suspicion and at times active hostility.

There was, during the nineteenth century, strong approval by many of the work of the Sisterhoods, yet there was little or no sympathy or understanding for their distinctive way of life. This resulted in the Victorian attitude toward the communities being rather ambivalent; the communities were at one and the same time attractive and suspect. The years in which the Sisterhoods were being established were times of religious tension, suspicion and high party feeling, due, in part, to Catholic Emancipation and the revival of diocesan bishoprics in England by the Roman Church. ("Papal Aggression".) The Crimean War, with the outstanding nursing services performed by the Sisters, did much to

improve the situation and, little by little, respect for the Sisters was achieved. English people who believed monks and nuns were popish were slowly convinced that this "dressing - up " was not just for the sake of aesthetics or a romantic longing for a bygone era.

The Sisterhoods were accused of disrupting family life, so very dear to the Victorian. Protestant appeals to the integrity of the family were employed against Sisterhoods. In Maude: or the Anglican Sister of Mercy, we find an illustration of such an appeal:

" God has given us our home ties and duties;  
and to set these aside for work planned and  
devised by ourselves is not in reality  
following Him, but following ourselves." 20

Six months after the opening of the Park Village Sisterhood, people stopped attending services at the church at which the Sisters also worshipped, for they suspected them of being disguised Roman Catholics. The Diocesan, Bishop Blomfield, objected to the type of devotions of the Sisterhood (Pusey's adaptation of Roman Catholic books), and also the fact that the Sisterhood was almost wholly under the guidance of a clergyman not in any way connected with his diocese (Pusey was canonically resident in the Diocese of Oxford.) The Bishop felt he must withhold his approval from the Sisterhood because its tone and tendency appeared to be toward Rome.

The most persecuted Anglican foundress was Lydia Sellon. In 1849 the Reverend John Hatchard visited and corresponded with Mother Lydia and then proceeded to publish their correspondence, charging her with such Roman Catholic tendencies as wearing a distinctive dress, the name of Sister of Mercy, and wearing the cross in public. A storm of protest and criticism arose when it was discovered that Pusey had celebrated the

Eucharist in the house of the Sisters, and had used the cross on the communion table, and had flowers for ornaments! Other charges made in 1852, accused the Devonport Sisterhood of developing such "monastic tendencies" as the (supposed) control of the Sisters' property, and that the Sisters were unable to withdraw from the community at will. Other objectionable popish practices were: regular confession, use of Roman Catholic symbols and pictures, prayers for the departed, common use of the Sarum Psalter and Breviary, fasting and physical austerities and the doctrine of "infallibility" as held by the Superior. The Bishop thought Miss Sellon had gone too far in this regard, coming to be called "spiritual Mother," "Mother in Christ," etc. It was on these grounds that the Bishop of Exeter announced his withdrawal as Visitor, although he praised the work of the Sisterhood and wished it to continue. In 1863 the publication of Experiences of an English Sister Of Mercy, written by a former Sister, was full of tales of supposed tyranny, selfishness, cruelty, spiritual pride and hypocrisy on the part of Mother Lydia toward her Sisters. So severe became the criticism, that Pusey disclaimed official connection with the Sisterhood at Devonport.

Approval for the first Sisters of St. Margaret was far from unanimous. The Vicar of East Grinstead abhorred the Sisters. "The first case of infectious fever," he said, "which I have, I will ask them to undertake it, and then perhaps we shall get rid of them." <sup>21</sup> In the early days of the cottage nursing, a poor sick woman to whom the Sisters sought to minister protested: "I will not have any ladies that worship images in my house." <sup>22</sup> In November of 1857, the Sisters and their founder, Dr. Neale, were set upon by a mob during the burial of one of the Sisters.

Neale was knocked down and trampled on, the Sisters were hustled and insulted, and only the timely arrival of the police enabled them to escape without further harm. The father of the deceased Sister had incited the riot. He was enraged by the fact that she left her small fortune to the Society of St. Margaret and her brother. He said his daughter had been trapped into entering the Sisterhood, was forced to make a will favoring the community, and was then deliberately exposed to infection. These charges flamed into a riot when they were fed to anti-Catholic fanatics. As a result of this incident Bishop Gilbert of Chichester withdrew as Visitor. Most of the Sisterhoods escaped such intensely violent onslaughts, yet they were frequently suspect and mildly despised by many English people.

Hostility was also directed towards the early communities on the basis of the celibate life-style they followed. The three religious vows were a further source of contention. While ordinary people might laugh or sneer at "Puseyite Nunneries" while not taking them very seriously, the Bishops were worried because few of them believed that a young woman had the moral right to make a promise to dedicate herself to a life-long service to God if the promise entailed not marrying. They had a horror of religious vows as "Romish" abuses. Some objected to vows because they could not be dispensed, as the Church of England had repudiated the claim of having the power to dispense vows. In 1865 Bishop Fait described vows as "illegal oaths." The early Sisters looked upon their promises as implying life-long consecration. Many of the first Sisters took vows privately, knowing that the Bishops would refuse to sanction them. Pusey, Neale, and Benson were for vows from the outset; Carter was not at first,

but later experience made him realize that the vows were a support to the life and an expression of this particular vocation.

" We, who are admitted to the priesthood, are under vows; we devote ourselves for a whole life; why should not women also for their offices? It seems to me a more religious way of devoting themselves to their office, than if they reserved to themselves the power to draw back." 23

Pusey.

It was not until 1889 that the vows of Religious received the official sanction of the Convocation of the Church of England.

By 1878 there were 660 Professed Sisters in the Province of Canterbury alone. It was apparent that the Sisterhoods had come to stay. Many persons, and factors had played a part in bringing forth to new life the monastic plant which had been deeply rooted in English soil, but, in the last analysis, it is perceived above all as the work of God.

" It was not planned by man: it originated in the providential leadings of God. He began: he carried it on: he gave strength: he will give the increase. " 24

Pusey



## Footnotes

1. Sir Thomas More, or Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society, Vol. II, p. 318
2. cf. the article "Religious Orders in Anglicanism" in the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, F.L. Cross, Ed. (Oxford University Press, London, 1958)
3. A.M. Allchin, The Silent Rebellion (SCM Press, Ltd. London, 1958), p. 30.
4. The system of nursing by the Sisters of Charity in France was so fine and worked so well that many desired to emulate it.
5. Allchin, p. 52.
6. This, incidentally, is sometimes given as one of the reasons why the Sisterhoods began before the Brotherhoods in the revival of the Religious Life in Anglicanism. In the original development of monasticism the men's orders preceded the women's, and the contemplative life the active life.
7. Ralph W. Sockman, The Revival of the Conventual Life in the Church of England in the Nineteenth Century ( W.D. Gray, N.Y.C., 1917 ), p. 48.
8. Ibid, p. 44.
9. Ibid, p. 105, 106.
10. Michael Hill, The Religious Order (Heinemann Educational Books, London, 1973 ), p. 300.
11. Allchin, p. 115.
12. Quoted in Hill, p. 272.
13. This is another reason for the reversal of the development of the Religious Life in the Church of England. The historical development generally was from contemplative communities to active ones.
14. Quoted in Allchin, p. 120.
15. Even in John Mason Neale's Ayton Priory (1843), there is a utilitarian tone to the list of reasons for the revival of the monastic life. This shows the strong pull of popular opinion towards a practical rather than a theologically defined role for the new communities. Neale's writing shows the necessary compromise for a claim to legitimacy to gain broad support.
16. As quoted in Allchin, p. 58.

Footnotes (continued)

17. When it came to drawing up Rules, the Tractarians turned to seventeenth century French models and borrowed from St. Francis de Sales and St. Vincent de Paul.
18. The two communities were combined under the name of the Society of the Most Holy Trinity.
19. Margaret Goodman, author of Sisterhoods in the Church of England ( 1863) , and a perceptive critic of Sisterhoods, warned that the Sisterhoods would not provide a home for the idle lady because "the work is far too real to be performed by lagging hands."
20. Miss Whately, ed. (London, Harrison, 1869) pp. 18-19. Quoted in Hill, p. 298.
21. Sockman, p. 149.
22. Hugh A. Lawrence Rice, The Bridge Builders (Longmans, Green & Co., 1961) p. 154.
23. Sockman, p. 113.
24. as quoted in Allchin, p. 68.

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